

Editorial: Explore ways to give the state Supreme Court more diversity

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A STATE Senate committees attempt to improve state Supreme Court justice selection is a step in the right direction, but it ought to look deeper for a more comprehensive solution.

The Senate Law and Justice Committee will hold a work session Friday to explore switching Supreme Court selection from statewide to district elections. The aim is to elect more justices from the eastern part of the state.

Currently, all but one of nine justices are from the Puget Sound region, Washingtons most dominant population center. The sole member with Eastern Washington roots, Justice Debra L. Stephens, was first appointed to the seat when another justice retired.

Diversity of the court is important but not just ethnic or geographic diversity. Diversity of lifestyle and community adds strength to the states highest court, too.

But while the committee chairman, state Sen. Mike Padden, a Spokane Valley Republican, is making a genuine attempt to improve the Supreme Court, why stop at district elections?

Washington hasn't attempted serious comprehensive improvements to its judicial selection process since the unheeded Walsh Commission of 1996.

And one area crying out for reform is the qualification process. Currently, appellate court judges have a higher eligibility standard for the bench than Supreme Court justices. They have to practice law for five years, while a Supreme Court justice needs only to be licensed to practice law with no experience required.

So the discussion initiated by Padden with his draft constitutional amendment is welcome.

As part of his goal of seeing more geographic diversity on the states highest court, Padden has requested input from the Washington State Bar Association. And the bar association is expected to reply by early next year.

But the process needs additional input.

Chief Justice Barbara Madsen, who does not support the change, says she has not been asked to testify before the committee, but would be willing to if asked. Why wait?

If improvement of the judicial selection process is the objective, the committee should get feedback from anyone and everyone who can help make the states judiciary the best that it can be.

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